

# Caw-ght in a Conspiracy

You were minding your own business, walking down the city street, only to see the strangest sight before you. A set of vans, parked up on the side of the road, a logo for 'Eastbank Zoo' plastered on their sides, and what looked like employees from said zoo flagging down a man just ahead of you, one holding them by the shoulder as the others seemed to check their pockets and clothing. What happened next left you questioning what you had seen as the employee seemed to pull off the man's... hand? It was hard to tell from a distance, but it looked... plasticky, like that of a mannequin.

Their body suddenly exploded outwards, clothing torn to shreds by a sudden onset of mass, revealing gray, leathery skin underneath. Their frame swelled as they grew and grew, shoes crushed under large, bulky paws, attached to cylindrical legs, unable to carry their new stocky barrel like torso, as they collapsed onto all fours, the other mannequin hand crushed under a four toed foreleg. Their hair slipped from their flat, hourglass shaped head, revealed to be a ill fitting wig, as their large tusked maw letting out a bellow of surprise, dark, beady eyes looking around in confusion as a snare pole looped around their neck, leading the hippopotamus into a cage which was then loaded into the van, the doors shutting behind them as the employees continued further down the street.

Your body had frozen up in shock. How was that possible? There was no way that man could've been a hippo, and besides, you knew that Zoo. Almost nobody went there anymore, due to a lack of animals. They certainly didn't have any hippos! Curious for answers, you couldn't help but sneak your way over to the nearest van, peering through it's boot window. The faces of numerous different wildlife stared back at you, ranging from a tiger, to a polar bear, even an axolotl drifting inside a tank! One thing was consistent amongst all of them though, they seemed disorientated and confused. Wait... how could all these creatures even fit inside the back of a Van anyways? You didn't get to follow that train of thought as one of the men suddenly put their hand on their shoulder. "Excuse me Sir/Ma'am. Have you seen any other wildlife running around? They're exceptionally crafty you know. Managed to disguise themselves as humans to escape us!... Wait a second..."

You barely had any time to react as the man suddenly grabbed your face, before pulling it off Scooby-Doo style, revealing a corvid head underneath, covered in black feathers, your beak letting out a "Caw!" of shock, the man letting go as the latex facemask fell to the pavement. You couldn't believe it, reaching up to feel your face. Had that... come from you? Your hands met with the beak, it felt hard, and tugging on it elicited pain. It was... real? How? Taken by surprise, you could only stumble backwards, shoes slipping free of your wooden stilts, before those also came loose, pants going with them as they clattered to the ground, revealing your real taloned feet, attached to your tiny avian legs. Another "Caw!" left your beak as you found yourself suddenly tumbling over. And without the stilts holding you up, the rest of your disguise came apart as you fell, your feathered wings letting go of the gloves as they slipped free of your coat's sleeves, prioritizing your fall as you instinctively tried to flap them, managing to right yourself as you landed, shirt pooling around you as you struggled to free yourself, managing to wiggle your way out through one of your sleeves.

You contemplated flying away, only to become distracted by the glint of a coin on the sidewalk. You had to have it! Forgetting your current worries, you hopped over, snatching it up with your beak. Success! The shiny thing was yours! You felt proud of yourself, tail feathers bristling behind you, only to snap back to reality as the employee's hands suddenly grabbed ahold of you, cradled around your wings to prevent you from flying away. It was only then that you'd realised just how much you'd shrunk!

"I knew it! A Raven. Bet you were trying to free your buddies while we were distracted by your hippo friend, eh? Too bad~. You might be a clever bird, but not clever enough to outwit us!" He said, carrying you over to the van, and setting you down on its, taking this chance, you turned to leave, only for the glint of an object to once again distract you. A shiny silver chain, dangling temptingly from the employee's hand. You couldn't help but tilt your head, hoping closer, corvid instincts demanding that you grabbed the shiny thing! They chuckled, tossing the chain deeper into the Van. As soon as they let go, you were on it, Cawing and flapping your wings as you chased after the chain, snatching it up in your beak, dancing happily with your new trinket, only to realise you'd been tricked again as the door of a birdcage clicked shut behind you!

"Now, stay there and be a good little Raven, aye? If you behave, you'll get more of those shiny things you love~" The employee said, before turning around and leaving you to your fate. You tried to protest. You weren't a bird! But with your human disguise gone, all you could do was chirp and caw, watching as other people were 'found out' to be escaped zoo animals. Guess they'd have their attractions back soon, one way or another...

Later that week, Eastbank Zoo celebrated its grand reopening, seeing a record number of visitors since its creation. It was no doubt helped by its catalog of rare and exotic animals, containing species even the most prestigious of zoos and reserves struggled to obtain. Of course, there were those who were suspicious, attempting to investigate the origins of these creatures. But their attempts always came up short, and nobody ever noticed when an extra lemur or porpoise showed up within the exhibits anyways. Eventually, everyone just forgot about the disappearances, and the news moved on to other, more important things, such as the Zoo's new beloved mascot, Jasper the Raven. They were such a talented bird, able to perform tricks, follow commands, even communicate with a pen and paper! They almost felt human with how intelligent they were. But they weren't, obviously. After all, no human could be bribed with pebbles and bits of polished metal, getting excited whenever they earned a new coin or jangly toy to play with. No... they were just as ordinary as the rest of the animals that inhabited the zoo. To think they were anything else... well, you had to be birdbrained~